

# Pitfalls of a Cartesian Maxim

*A conversation about the trap inside “we should never assume to be true anything which is false.”*

## Know One.

Can you help me map the potential pitfalls for a mental approach:

*“We should never assume to be true anything which is false.”*

If I try to sincerely follow this, where might I find pitfalls? I’m not asking for generally applicable knowledge — what I’m asking is: what if there is a false assumption in assuming this? Could there be a trapping in this assumption? That’s what I’m worried about.

*Excerpt from The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1 — René Descartes, John Cottingham & Robert Stoothoff.*

## Claude

Yeah — there’s a real recursion problem buried in that maxim, and I think your instinct to look at it sideways is right. Let me lay out the traps I see.

**The maxim eats itself if you push hard enough.** “Never assume true anything which is false” presupposes you have reliable access to the false/true distinction *prior* to acting. But the whole reason you’d need such a maxim is that you *don’t* — you’re often discovering falsity after the fact. So the rule is doing work it can’t actually verify it’s doing. Following it sincerely could mean believing you’re following it when you’re not, which is itself a false assumption smuggled in through the back door.

**It collapses into paralysis or false confidence — rarely lands in between.** The honest version requires withholding assent from anything not yet verified, which in practice means very little gets through. Descartes himself ran into this and had to bolt on a “provisional morality” so he could still eat lunch and cross streets while doubting everything. The dishonest version is worse: you keep operating at normal speed but now believe your beliefs are filtered, which makes you *more* certain of contingent things, not less. The maxim can function as a confidence laundromat.

**It privileges a particular failure mode and hides the symmetric one.** The rule is asymmetric — it’s about not letting falsehood *in*. But there’s a parallel error: refusing truth that hasn’t yet earned formal credentials. Splenic-style signals, somatic knowing, pattern recognition that arrives ahead of articulation — all of that gets read as “unverified” under a strict reading and quietly discarded. You can end up epistemically tidier and substantively poorer. For someone whose primary instrument is a single-fire post-action ledger rather than a deliberative pre-filter, this trap is especially live.

**“False” is doing more work than it looks.** The maxim treats falsity as a stable property of propositions. But a lot of what you’d want to call false is context-dependent, scale-dependent, or framing-dependent — true at one resolution, false at another. “The sun rises” is false astronomically, true phenomenologically, and useful agriculturally. A strict rule against assuming-false treats these as the same kind of thing and

forces you to pick a level at which to evaluate. Whichever level you pick becomes an unexamined assumption — the very thing the maxim was supposed to protect against.

**It can become a purification ritual.** Sincere adherence over time tends to produce a feeling of epistemic cleanliness — *I have only true beliefs because I have been careful*. That feeling is itself a belief, and it's almost certainly false. The maxim doesn't include a mechanism for catching its own shadow, so the more sincerely you follow it, the more confident you become in a stance the maxim cannot underwrite. This is the trap I'd flag hardest given your interest in substrates and recursion: the rule generates a stable recursive instability where the cleanup process produces the contamination.

**It can isolate.** Held strictly, it makes shared knowledge harder, not easier. Most of what humans know they know on testimony — from people, traditions, lineages. A strong “don't assume false” filter treats inherited knowing as suspect by default, which over time erodes the substrate that lets you check your work against anyone else's. Descartes ended up reconstructing the world from a single thinking point partly because of this; whether that's a triumph or a cautionary tale depends on your taste.

The version that tends to be more livable is something like: *hold beliefs at the confidence they actually deserve, and notice when you're treating a working assumption as a verified one*. That keeps the spirit of the maxim — vigilance against smuggled certainty — without the recursive trap of needing to already know what's false in order to avoid assuming it.

### **Know One.**

Can you bundle the whole conversation into a PDF? Prompts and answers — or do I have to export it first?

### **Claude**

I can build the PDF for you right here — no export needed. (This document is the result.)